

The Chicago Freedom Movement and Education

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In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court passed the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision outlawing school segregation. Though black Chicago already had a long history of fighting for good education, the racial basis for unequal education still existed within the Chicago public schools. The plight of housing segregation and discrimination for African Americans had a direct impact on the quality of school facilities and education for African Americans students. The practice of redlining was used to segregate African American communities and as a result directly segregated schools. Redlining was also a racial practice used to limit the African American people's use of resources. Redlining is the practice of "arbitrarily denying or limiting financial services to specific neighborhoods;" generally its residents were people of color or poor. These practices were among the many the city government used to limit the availability of the resources the African American people had in the community. Because of this, many African Americans had to travel long distances to find a work place and decent schools for their children.

Due to housing segregation in Chicago, many of the schools that blacks were able to go to became overcrowded. In a Chicago ghetto school of the 1960s, 40 to 50 students were often stuffed into a single room. In a crowded classroom like this, the children received no special attention in school, and they become resentful. Teachers tended to be reduced to custodians whose greatest accomplishment was physical order and quiet. Some teachers in such conditions operated desperately and left at the first opportunity.

They were not escaping from this or that race, however. They were rebelling at wretched learning and teaching conditions. Children of the ghetto desperately needed individual attention from their teachers. They needed continued attention, but they did not receive it.

In order to reduce class size from 50 students per class to about 15 per class and solve some of the problems of school overcrowding Al Raby, a former Chicago public school teacher and local civil rights activist, brought Martin Luther King, Jr. to Chicago to protest and strike against the Chicago school board and a system symbolized by the Willis Wagons. Willis Wagons was “the pejorative term for portable school classrooms used by critics of Superintendent of Schools Benjamin C. Willis (1953–1966), when protesting school overcrowding and segregation in black neighborhoods from 1962 to 1966,” according to the *Encyclopedia of Chicago*.

The African American community tried to do a lot against school inequality through marches, protests, and strikes. The simplest way was speaking out on the issues. The most active organization was the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCCO) headed by Al Raby. In one case, the CCCCCO demanded that the Chicago Public School Board hold up action on the 1967 school budget until it had heard recommendations of a civil rights task force cooperating with schools. They wanted equality in schools. They wanted equal budgeting in both black and white schools. They also wanted integrated schools so blacks could go where they pleased, be happy, and end overcrowding. The fight was a long and hard fight but things were accomplished.

There are still sections in Chicago that have all white schools and all black schools along with other minorities. Most suburban schools still have better supplies and better learning environments than neighborhood schools. There are still school strikes,

and people still speak out about segregation. [From Chicago Urban League, National Urban League Leadership Development Project, Project Director: Miss Willene DeMond, Anatomy of a Boycott, Edward Jenner School, 1964; Thomas Lee Philpott, *Black Metropolis*; *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, “Redlining,” and “Willis Wagons”; and Bill Van Alstine, CCCO To Demand Delay In School Budget Passage, *Chicago Defender* (Daily Edition), Dec. 6, 1966.]